

The Star-Ledger

Murphy appoints interim N.J. attorney general after Grewal's departure

By Blake Nelson and Brent Johnson

NJ Advance Media for NJ.com and The Star-Ledger

Published June 30, 2021

Gov. Phil Murphy has appointed Andrew Bruck, the state's leading assistant attorney general, to be New Jersey's top law enforcement official for the rest of the year.

Bruck, 38, will serve as the state's acting attorney general until Murphy's term ends in January. The Democratic governor is running for re-election in November.

Bruck succeeds Gurbir Grewal, who has been New Jersey's longest-serving attorney general in decades but announced Tuesday he was stepping down to investigate financial misconduct with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, the federal agency that regulates financial markets.

Grewal's last day is July 16, a spokesman said.

A graduate of Princeton University and Stanford Law School, Bruck worked at the U.S. Department of Justice and in the U.S. Attorney's Office in New Jersey before joining the state attorney general's office.

"Over the last three and a half years, he has played in a leading role in our efforts to build trust between communities and law enforcement and to stand up for New Jersey's residents in the face of attacks from Washington, D.C.," Murphy said Wednesday at his latest coronavirus briefing in Trenton.

"Andrew's a star," the governor added during his radio show later in the evening.

Bruck is the first known openly gay attorney general in state history, at a time when officials are apologizing for the office's past treatment of LGBTQ residents.

"This reflects our continuing commitment to ensuring that our state government reflects the rich diversity of our people," Murphy said.

In a statement, Bruck thanked Murphy "for the confidence that he has placed in me, and I am honored by the opportunity to continue the groundbreaking work of Attorney General Grewal."

"I share their commitment to protecting public safety, building public trust, and ensuring the rights of all New Jerseyans," Bruck added.

The job opening added to the election-year turnover among the governor's top staff, since Murphy is already considering candidates to run the prison system and lead a corrections watchdog office.

Jack Ciattarelli, the Republican nominee for governor, seized on the change.

“No Attorney General was as anti-cop as Gurbir Grewal, so this is good news for our law enforcement community,” Ciattarelli Tweeted Tuesday. “Unless, of course, Murphy replaces Grewal with another extreme partisan.”

Although Grewal pushed back against calls to “defund the police,” he did advance many progressive policies, including new use-of-force rules and a website allowing residents to track every time cops use physical force statewide. Police unions often publicly backed him, although the two sides recently clashed over a plan to publicly identify officers found guilty of misconduct.

The state Supreme Court eventually ruled Grewal could name disciplined cops.

Throughout Grewal’s tenure, Bruck has been one of his top lieutenants.

In the early days of the pandemic, when public defenders pushed to release many people from county jails, Grewal asked Bruck to lead the negotiations.

“In normal circumstances, we would never want them out,” Bruck said March 27 of last year during an American Bar Association webinar. “But these are extraordinary times, and we are really concerned about the public health risks.”

Bruck worked on ways local prosecutors could keep certain people behind bars, and about 700 were eventually set free to head off the risk of infection.

He also worked on a legislative plan to eliminate some mandatory minimum sentences. That proposal has failed to become law, so in April Grewal unilaterally moved to ease sentences for people who committed non-violent drug offenses.

Bruck previously clerked for state Supreme Court Chief Justice Stuart Rabner, was an associate at the firm Davis Polk & Wardwell and spent five years at the U.S. Department of Justice, according to his official bio.

“Andrew Bruck has the unique ability to lead by genuinely listening to all sides of issues, crafting bold, principled and practical solutions, and then giving everyone else credit for it,” former acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Yates said in a statement. “He is trusted by both the civil rights and law enforcement communities because of his track record for forging much-needed meaningful reforms to our criminal justice system while respecting the difficult and crucial role of law enforcement.”

Bruck grew up in Montclair and Mendham and now lives in Trenton with his husband Adam and 8-month-old daughter, Libby, officials said.

If the governor is re-elected, Murphy will either have to re-nominate Bruck or submit another name to the state Senate for consideration.